Go-Go Live
The Musical Life and Death of a Chocolate City

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“Taking us into the little-studied terrain of go-go, the cousin of hip-hop born and bred in Washington, D.C., Natalie Hopkinson reveals go-go as a lens for seeing, in stark colors, how the economy, politics, and especially the drug trade have traduced black communities around the world.”—Henry Louis Gates Jr., Alphonse Fletcher University Professor, Harvard University

Go-go is the conga drum–inflected black popular music that emerged in Washington, D.C., during the 1970s. The guitarist Chuck Brown, the “Godfather of Go-Go,” created the music by mixing sounds borrowed from church and the blues with the funk and flavor that he picked up playing for a local Latino band. Born in the inner city, amid the charred ruins of the 1968 race riots, go-go generated a distinct culture and an economy of independent, almost exclusively black-owned businesses that sold tickets to shows and recordings of live go-gos. At the peak of its popularity, in the 1980s, go-go could be heard around the capital every night of the week, on college campuses and in crumbling historic theaters, hole-in-the-wall nightclubs, backyards, and city parks.

Go-Go Live is a social history of black Washington told through its go-go music and culture. Encompassing dance moves, nightclubs, and fashion, as well as the voices of artists, fans, business owners, and politicians, Natalie Hopkinson's Washington-based narrative reflects the broader history of race in urban America in the second half of the twentieth century and the early twenty-first. In the 1990s, the middle class that had left the city for the suburbs in the postwar years began to return. Gentrification drove up property values and pushed go-go into D.C.'s suburbs. The Chocolate City is in decline, but its heart, D.C.’s distinctive go-go musical culture, continues to beat. On any given night, there's live go-go in the D.C. metro area.

Natalie Hopkinson, a contributing editor to the online magazine The Root, teaches journalism at Georgetown University and directs the Future of the Arts and Society project as a fellow of the Interactivity Foundation. A former writer and editor at the Washington Post, she is the author, with Natalie Y. Moore, of Deconstructing Tyrone: A New Look at Black Masculinity in the Hip-Hop Generation. She has contributed to the Wall Street Journal, the New York Times, and TheAtlantic.com and done commentary for NPR and the BBC.

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About Natalie Hopkinson

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“Black Washington, D.C. has a famously rich history and culture. Natalie Hopkinson has an established reputation as one of the most sophisticated commentators on contemporary black culture in the capital city. *Go-Go Live* is not only a fascinating account of a musical culture, but also a social and cultural history of black Washington in the post–civil rights era.”—**Mark Anthony Neal**, author of *New Black Man*

*Go-Go Live* is not just a fantastic read, but THE definitive study of D.C.’s most overlooked and unheralded art form. Natalie Hopkinson captures the soul of the city.”—**Dana Flor**, codirector of *The Nine Lives of Marion Barry*

*Go-Go Live* is a terrific and important piece of work. Music, race, and the city are three key pivot points of our society, and Natalie Hopkinson pulls them together in a unique and powerful way. I have long adored Washington, D.C.’s go-go music. This book helped me understand the history of the city and the ways that it reflects the whole experience of race and culture in our society. It puts music front and center in the analysis of our urban experience, something which has been too long in coming.”—**Richard Florida**, author of *The Rise of the Creative Class* and director of the Martin Prosperity Institute at the Rotman School of Management, University of Toronto

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Go-go music and its performers (Chuck Brown, Big G, Anthony “Little Benny” Harley) may have little cachet among a general audience, but Hopkinson, journalist and devotee, makes a persuasive case that “go-go serves as a metaphor for the black urban experience in the second half of the twentieth century.” Most deeply rooted in Washington, D.C., the heavily percussive, call-and-response dance music reflects the links between West Africa and the black diaspora, even as its content is centered on contemporary themes. As Hopkinson traces the music’s trajectory—particularly the rise and demise of Club U (by day a municipal center, by night a dance club) and of the curatorial entrepreneur Nico Holson—she delineates the divisions between “white federal Washington and black local D.C.” epitomized by the destruction of the once vibrant local go-go economy along the U Street, N.W., and H Street, N.E., corridors. Part history of, part elegy for, “the displacement of black communities and a slow death of the Chocolate City,” the text is supplemented by a rich photo insert documenting both dance floor and street. Across the world and throughout history, Hopkinson says, “black music has been the primary medium to deliver news.” Her assessment of a local phenomenon offers a glimpse of a culture off the mainstream’s radar. 34 b&w illus.

(June)

Go-go music is the soul of Washington, but it's slipping away

By Natalie Hopkinson
Sunday, April 11, 2010; B01

It was just another gig at a D.C. area nightclub, one of several shows the band Suttle Thoughts plays each week, drawing hundreds of young professionals in their 20s and 30s - - a self-proclaimed "grown and sexy" crowd. But a club manager stopped the band at the door when he noticed one of the musicians bringing in a set of conga drums, bandleader Chi Ali told me.

If you are in or near the District and you see a young black bandleader trailed by a horn section, guitars, keyboards, cow bells and congas, that can only mean one thing: They play go-go music, the area's unique style of funk. And if you run a club, having a go-go band perform can be complicated. On the upside, the place is going to be packed, and you will rake it in at the bar. On the downside, the crowds can get volatile, drawing extra police scrutiny.

On that day early this year, the club manager didn't want to bother. So he told the band to get its things and go.

This is what it has come to: one of the city's only true indigenous art forms -- the one generations of Washingtonians have grooved to - - unceremoniously cast away. Not only is go-go being shut out from clubs that could still support it, the retail stores that nurtured the music are fading away.

Cities change all the time, but this is about more than mourning what's gone. As go-go shifts to the margins in the District, we are losing something bigger. Go-go may be invisible to much of white Washington, but it's as much a part of the city as the pillars and monuments of its federal face. On any given day, in any number of clubs, parks, community centers, schools and back yards throughout the region, you can find up to a dozen young musicians on a stage, playing before ecstatic, sweaty crowds.

Go-go is Washington. The music never made a real national splash, but it has come to reflect this city, its artistic pulse and the often painful reality of life for many of its black residents.

Now the place that created go-go is shoving it aside.

The U Street NW and H Street NE corridors have gone upscale, pushing out the places where you could buy tickets, hear go-go music live and purchase your neighborhood's unique brand of embroidered sweats. Ibex, a popular Georgia Avenue NW go-go club, has been transformed into luxury condos. The flagship store for local urbanwear designer We R One on Florida Avenue NW went out of business a couple of summers ago. I-Hip-Hop and Go-Go, a store on H Street NE, has been shuttered. The flagship location of P.A. Palace, a chain of go-go stores, has been bulldozed to make way for a Wal-Mart in Landover Hills.

Before the drive-by shooting in Southeast last month -- one of the deadliest shootings in the District in years -- the city was touting the progress it had made in curbing crime. The murder rate was at a 45-year low. When crime statistics were released in January, one of the factors that D.C. Police Chief Cathy Lanier credited for the reduction in violence was her department's "go-go report," a list of all the concerts going on around the city. When I asked a police spokeswoman to explain how the "go-go report" works -- and how monitoring cuts down on crime -- she refused to comment, citing "law enforcement sensitive information."

Of course a police presence is needed at any activity that draws big crowds. But how else to interpret Lanier's comments to reporters, other than that the city is safer because it is reining in the music?

"I can't imagine my life without go-go," said DJ Flexx of WPGC (95.5 FM), a popular hip-hop station. But the music "is on life support," he said.

The city needs to be throwing out an oxygen mask. Without go-go, Washington loses part of its soul and continues its steady march toward becoming richer, whiter -- less funkified.

As with many nonnative Washingtonians, my introduction to the genre came from Spike Lee's 1988 film "School Daze," which spawned one of the few mainstream go-go hits, "Da Butt" by the band E.U. I started hanging out on the go-go scene a decade ago, first as a youth-culture writer for The Washington Post and then as an ethnographer earning my doctorate at the University of Maryland. Go-go is played on D.C. hip-hop stations such as WPGC and WKYS (93.9 FM), but the recordings don't come close to translating the joyous, infectious energy of the live shows.

You know it's go-go by its signature, slow-driving conga beat. The music sounds like a grittier kind of funk, with a "lead talker" calling out fans, a rapper and an R&B vocalist singing original songs and go-go versions of hits by artists from Ashlee Simpson to Ludacris. The most popular go-go bands, such as TCB -- a fixture since the early 2000s -- play as many as four gigs a week and easily draw 500 to 1,000 fans per night, with clubs turning people away at the door.
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Nico "the Go-Go-ologist" Hobson, a music historian and collector who is a fixture on the scene, says there are more new bands forming than ever. While not a route to the high life or visits to the White House, for many local artists, becoming a go-go superstar is a more attainable goal than being the next Jay-Z.

But Hobson says keeping the music alive is an uphill battle. Not only is go-go fighting economic and political pressures, it is also suffering from self-inflicted wounds. Violence surged around go-go with the crack trade in the 1980s and 1990s, and over the years, several high-profile tragedies have taken place near the clubs.

Marvin "Slushy" Taylor, who invented the "Beat Your Feet" dance craze (and inspired the recent MTV reality show stars Beat Ya Feet Kings) was killed at age 19 after leaving a go-go in 2002. In 1997, D.C. police officer Brian T. Gibson was killed outside Ibex on Georgia Avenue. In 2007, high school cheerleader Taleshia Ford, 17, was killed inside a U Street area go-go by a stray bullet.

Ford's death was the fourth killing connected to dance clubs around U Street within three years, and some clubs were eventually shut down. Among them was Club U, at 14th and U streets, which had helped rejuvenate the neighborhood beginning in the early 1990s, transforming the Reeves Municipal Center into a go-go at night. After a fatal stabbing in 2005, the club lost its liquor license and closed.

Go-go music is not any more violent than, say, punk music. But it does reflect what is going on in a neighborhood. Fans sometimes bring their turf battles, which can include neighborhood rivalries, to concerts. These are exacerbated by the competition to see whose crew or neighborhood will be acknowledged on the mike. As one D.C. police officer once said, it's often simply a matter of youth, immaturity and too much alcohol coming together.

Go-go also channels much of the grief experienced in too many parts of our city. At a Haiti benefit concert in January, Peculiar People Band lead vocalist Dre MayDay, 22, explained how people at the show could relate to the hopelessness on the island since the earthquake. "I know we are not strangers to the pain," he said to the audience filled with teens, many of them hoisting "R.I.P." T-shirts to honor fallen friends. "We are not strangers to the struggle. We gon' sing this song so loud that they can hear us all the way in Haiti. We're dancing in the rain. We're dancing through the struggle and our pain."

Such grim eulogies were not what Chuck Brown, the Godfather of Go-Go, had in mind when he invented the sound around 1976. A jazz guitarist, Brown borrowed some elements from the Los Latinos band he played with, giving the music a Caribbean feel with conga drums, timbales, cow bells and a horn section. (The genre was named after a 1965 Smokey Robinson song, "Going to a Go-Go.")

Go-go helped rejuvenate areas such as U Street that for years were deeply scarred by the riots that erupted in 1968 after the assassination of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. Charred and abandoned buildings around the Howard Theatre near Georgia Avenue came back to life as the area filled with go-go shows.

Now, as the city's renaissance approaches full tilt, those venues are being replaced with a new kind of nightlife. The natural ebb and flow of business, fickle youth tastes and the growing incursion of hip-hop are all playing a part. But there is more to it than that: Go-go is also a victim of changing perceptions of what kind of nightlife Washington -- and its developers, business leaders and politicians -- want to have. There is little desire on their part to work with the young, black, sometimes-marginal community that supports go-go. As the authors Kip Lornell and Charles Stephenson wrote in their 2001 book on Washington's go-go scene, "The Beat," the music "wears the mantle of low-class or blue-collar music" and "remains ghettoized."

That's why the D.C. police "go-go report," and the police presence at many clubs, say so much to me about the direction in which this city is pushing the music.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, hip-hop artists were subject to some of the same police scrutiny after a spate of well-publicized killings -- including the deaths of rappers Biggie Smalls and Tupac Shakur. After years of denying rumors of a "hip-hop task force," New York and Miami police admitted to the Village Voice in 2004 that they had units keeping tabs on hip-hop artists. At this revelation, everyone from rap mogul Russell Simmons to former NAACP leader Ben Chavis Muhammad to Georgetown University law professors got to howling. "Hip-Hop Behind Bars," I blanked a Source magazine cover.

So why no outrage when D.C. police mention their "go-go report"? One difference is in the size and power of the targets. Hip-hop is a billion-dollar international industry. Go-go is a network of local black-owned businesses. There are no "go-go intellectuals" in the Ivory Tower. "Go-Go is an easy scapegoat," said the Rev. Tony Lee, pastor of the Community of Hope A.M.E Church in Hillcrest Heights, who has worked on anti-violence initiatives with groups such as the Go-Go Coalition, the Backyard Band and the W.H.A.T.!? Band. (Last week the District revoked funding for one of these go-go-affiliated groups, the Peaceaholics, because of budget constraints.)

Lee said he has an excellent relationship with the Prince George's County police force, which is busy with its own crackdown on go-go clubs. There are class tensions there, too, since many suburban middle-class blacks are quick to distance themselves from the go-go culture. "We are talking about both generational and class warfare," Lee said.

But "go-go" also means constant motion -- wherever it goes. And lately that means out of D.C. and farther and farther into Maryland. I was recently encouraged by the scene on Martin Luther King Jr. Day at Lee's church. Hundreds of go-go fans, mostly young people, had flocked to the former big-box store in Iveson Mall to hear their favorite bands at the Haiti benefit concert, which raised $5,000 toward relief efforts.

It was go-go at its finest, a night that made it easier to defend the music than it often is. People who've lost loved ones to nightclub violence could care less that the conga player didn't do it; they just want the violence to stop. But despite all the pressures to do so, black people shouldn't walk away from a culture we create. Neither should that culture's city.

Speaking after the show that night, the Peculiar People Band leader, MayDay, told me he is saddened by the plight of go-go. "D.C.-Maryland, we are like our own little island," he said. "We have our own thing. If we were to let it go, we would start to be like the rest..."
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